

The AMBER Plan

The AMBER Alert is a voluntary, cooperative partnership between law-enforcement agencies and local broadcasters to send an emergency alert to the public when a child has been abducted and is believed to be in grave danger. Under the AMBER Plan, area radio and television stations interrupt programming to broadcast information about the missing child using the Emergency Alert System, formerly known as the Emergency Broadcast System. While EAS is typically used for alerting the public to severe weather emergencies, it is also the warning system for civil and national emergencies. The federal government requires all radio and television stations and most cable systems to install and maintain devices that can monitor EAS warnings and tests - and relay them rapidly to their audiences. The idea behind the AMBER Plan is a simple one: if stations can broadcast weather warnings through EAS, why not child abductions? The AMBER Plan provides law-enforcement agencies with a valuable tool to help recover abducted children and quickly apprehend the suspect.

The purpose of the AMBER Plan is to provide a rapid response to the most serious child abduction cases. When an alert is activated, law-enforcement agencies immediately gain the assistance of thousands of broadcast and cable listeners and viewers throughout the area. The plan relies on the community to safely recover the abducted child. It is hoped that this early warning system will not only coerce a kidnapper into releasing the child for fear of being arrested but also deter the person from committing the crime in the first place. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, about 74 percent of the children who are kidnapped and later found murdered were killed within the first three hours of being taken.

The AMBER plan was created in 1996 as a powerful legacy to 9-year old Amber Hagerman who was kidnapped and murdered in Arlington, Texas. Law enforcement says Amber was dragged from her bicycle while riding in a shopping center near her home. Her body was found four days later. The news of Amber's murder outraged the entire community and mobilized residents to take action. Following her murder, concerned individuals contacted local radio stations in the Dallas area and suggested that the station broadcast special "alerts" over the airwaves to help find abducted children. In response to this recommendation the Dallas/Fort Worth Association of Radio Managers, with the assistance of local law-enforcement agencies in northern Texas, established the AMBER Plan, America's Missing Broadcast Emergency Response. Initially only radio stations participated in the plan. In 1999, eight area television stations in the Dallas/Fort Worth area joined the plan and began sending out these urgent bulletins.

Utah adopted the AMBER Plan on April 2, 2002 and launched a statewide program that was originally called the Rachael Alert--after Rachael Marie Runyan. The three-year-old girl was kidnapped on August 26, 1982 while she was playing with her two brothers at a park in Sunset, Utah. Witnesses say the abductor offered Rachael some gum and then put her in his car and drove away. Rachael's body was found 24 days later in Weber Canyon. The Salt Lake City Police Department issued the first Rachael Alert after the kidnapping of Elizabeth Smart on June 5, 2002. The nationwide publicity about that case prompted many states to create their own AMBER Alert Plan and inspired Congress to start creating a nationwide AMBER Alert Plan. One year after the program was launched in Utah, the State changed the Rachael Alert to the AMBER Alert to avoid any public confusion. A Rachael Runyan Award was created to honor members of the public who help recover an abducted child.

The AMBER Alert

- Powerful law-enforcement tool and wonderful way broadcasters can contribute to their communities.
- Sends a strong message that law enforcement and broadcasters are providing a proactive way to help protect their community's children.

- Provides each agency with a rapid response to serious child abductions.
 - Dramatically increases law enforcement's ability to locate witnesses and resolve cases.
 - Engages the entire community to mobilize and assist with recovering the child and apprehending the abductor.
 - Acts as a deterrent to this type of crime.
 - Builds relations between law-enforcement, broadcasters and the community.
- Costs very little to implement.

To date this innovative early warning system has been credited with saving the lives of 16 children.

The Emergency Alert System - History and Requirements:

The AMBER Plan uses the Emergency Alert System, formerly the Emergency Broadcast System, to deliver urgent child-abduction bulletins to area radio and television stations and cable systems. The AMBER Plan Task Force in Dallas/Fort Worth, Texas chose this method of delivery because it is the oldest and most reliable means of relaying critical information to broadcasters quickly and simultaneously.

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) says the EAS is used to transmit "life-saving messages" to the public. The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children reminds us that child abductions can be life-or-death situations. If a community is slow to act, the child may not come home safely. If the abductor is not apprehended, then the entire community remains at risk. The EAS provides a rapid response to child-abduction cases so the community can immediately react.

The Emergency Alert System was created in 1994 by the FCC. The new system replaced the Emergency Broadcast System established in 1951 as a way to provide the President with a means to address the people of the United States in the event of a national emergency. Beginning in 1963, the President allowed state and local emergency information to be transmitted over the system as well. The FCC does not require stations and cable systems to broadcast state or local EAS Alerts. It is a voluntary service, but each station is required to broadcast national emergencies activated by the President.

The FCC requires all AM, FM, and television broadcast stations, as well as cable systems, to have an FCC-certified, fully operational EAS "encoder" for sending emergency information and a "decoder" for receiving emergency information. Other entities may voluntarily participate including satellite programmers and wireless telephone services. The FCC requires each broadcast station and cable system to monitor at least two independent EAS sources called primary EAS stations. Typically, if the first primary station is unable to broadcast the alert, the second station provides an automatic backup so an alert can be sent out to the community.

Primary EAS stations volunteer to relay the emergency information to all broadcasters and cable operators in the area. Once these outlets volunteer to relay an EAS warning, they will transmit the audio and/or visual messages according to FCC rules.

The EAS is designed to warn the public about emergencies ranging from fires and tornadoes to evacuations and toxic chemical spills. Utah is currently using the Child Abduction Emergency (CAE) code for all AMBER Alerts.

Benefits of the Emergency Alert System:

Immediate- Every radio and television broadcast station and cable system will receive the information quickly and simultaneously.

Inexpensive- There is no additional expense or reprogramming of the EAS receiver, unless the

state police or another state agency is called upon to activate the system. In these cases the state agency may need to purchase the equipment (unless they already own it).

Automatic- The new EAS utilizes digital equipment and digital signals that allow broadcasters and cable operators to interrupt programming for a warning manually or automatically. Since some broadcast and cable entities are programmed from far away, automatic activation for local and national emergencies is a key part of EAS. This would benefit stations and cable systems that are not staffed 24 hours a day because the system automatically overrides current programming and breaks in with the alert.

Accessible- You don't need a television or radio to receive an emergency alert. The EAS messages can now be received and decoded through specially equipped consumer products such as pagers, cellular telephones, and other devices.

Less Intrusive- EAS tests are shorter and less obtrusive to viewers and listeners; therefore, when people hear or see the EAS messages, they will take them more seriously.

Flexible- EAS digital messages can be automatically converted into any foreign language normally used by the broadcast station or cable system.

Law Enforcement Responsibilities:

The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children strongly encourages every law enforcement agency to have an established protocol for investigating missing/abducted-child cases. Only by developing effective and efficient policies and procedures can agencies help ensure the successful resolution of these cases.

Utah law enforcement agencies must consider the four important criteria noted below before sending out an AMBER Alert.

1. Law enforcement confirms a child has been abducted.
2. Law enforcement confirms the child is 17 years old or younger or has a proven mental or physical disability.
3. Law enforcement believes the circumstances surrounding the abduction indicate that the child is in serious danger of bodily harm or death.
4. There must be enough descriptive information about the child, abductor, and suspect's vehicle to believe an immediate broadcast alert will help.

Utah has developed its own standardized AMBER Alert form that can be sent by E-mail or by fax (E-mail is preferred). The form should only be sent when abduction has been confirmed. This form will be filled out by the agency investigating the case and sent to the primary EAS provider and is responsible for triggering the emergency alert system (KSL Radio). Having the AMBER Alert form in place will make it easier for your agency to prepare important information about the case. Law enforcement agencies can obtain the forms at the Web site of the [Utah Attorney General's Office](#).

Action Items:

Develop a major case-response plan- It is important that every department recognize the need to plan the response to activating the AMBER Alert. The agency must:

- Decide which person in the department can authorize an AMBER Alert.
- Obtain the information noted below before issuing an AMBER Alert. This information will

be included in the standardized form distributed to the primary radio and television stations.

- Name, age, and physical description of the child
 - Description of the child's clothing
 - Location and time that the child was last seen
 - Description of the vehicle involved in the abduction
 - Last known direction of travel and possible destination
 - The investigating law-enforcement agency and telephone number the public should call if they have information about the case
 - Name and telephone number of the contact person for the media
 - A recent photograph of the abducted child from the family
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- Once the victim and suspect information has been confirmed, it should be passed on to the appropriate officer in charge so an AMBER Alert form can be sent to the EAS broadcast station. Activation of the AMBER Alert Plan will only be authorized by the law-enforcement agency that reports the abduction. Broadcasters play no role in activating the plan.
 - As soon as possible, the investigating agency should obtain the most recent photograph of the abducted child. The photograph should then be scanned and E-mailed to broadcasters. Agencies without E-mail or Internet capability can fax the photograph, but should also take it to a central location, such as a command center, to allow the television stations to capture the photograph on camera.
 - Consideration must be made for allocating additional resources. Officers may need to be reassigned from other units. Assistance may be necessary from other municipal, county, and state agencies. The FBI should also be contacted.
 - Designate a media liaison to coordinate information and interviews. This person would also deal with individuals who have no investigative input.

Develop contact lists and confidential broadcast fax numbers- Telephone numbers, fax numbers, and E-mail addresses should be compiled and updated so that information can be disseminated quickly when abduction occurs. Law enforcement agencies will e-mail or fax the standardized form to the Salt Lake Communications Center. The form will be sent to KSL radio, the primary EAS provider for the state of Utah. KSL will then notify all other television, radio and cable stations through the EAS system. The Salt Lake Communications Center will also activate the electronic roadway signs, send a "Locator and Trak System" alert statewide, contact Utah Dispatch Centers, notify officers at all ports of entry and contact all agents of the Utah Trucking Association, notify the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children and customers requesting the alerts from America Online.

Establish telephone banks- Prior to activating the AMBER Alert, it is critical that "hotline" telephone banks are set up and staffed. Agencies must be positioned to receive and process leads from individuals. Volunteers or personnel must be in place to take calls for at least 24 hours after the plan is activated or until the alert is canceled.

Law-enforcement agencies must have an assigned telephone number that will be given out to the public during the alert message. This number must be able to rollover into several other separate lines to handle the large volume of leads that may come after the AMBER Alert activation.

Notify law-enforcement personnel- Someone in a supervisory role should notify the entire agency about the AMBER Alert and furnish all personnel with details about the case. Notify other agencies about the alert via an administrative message/teletype.

Contact NCMEC- Contact the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children for additional help. This can be done through the 24-hour hotline at 1-800-THE-LOST (1-800-843-5678)

Prepare for media reaction- Once the alert is activated, media coverage can be

overwhelming, especially for a small department. A public information office (PIO) should be appointed to handle the press. This will free up the sheriff or police chief who is trying to investigate the case. The PIO should keep the media informed about the case with daily updates and media releases. PIO's should be as accommodating as possible to the media to receive maximum exposure for their case.

Prepare for community reaction- Don't underestimate the power of the AMBER Alert. The reaction from the community will be intense and overwhelming because most people will want to help

Review alerts- After an alert is triggered, each agency should be prepared to file a report to the Review Committee. The report should include the reasons why the AMBER Alert was used. After the alert is reviewed, a written report should be sent to all participating members of the plan for their evaluation and recommendations.

Law enforcement agencies in Arlington, Texas, were criticized for not activating the alert often enough. When they changed and adopted a "rather safe than sorry" policy, they issued six alerts in five weeks that did not meet the criteria they felt was appropriate. Fearing the plan's credibility would suffer if it continued to operate under these guidelines, the Association of Radio Managers (ARMS) in Dallas/Fort Worth, established stricter criteria for activating the alert. ARMS also created a review committee to evaluate the circumstances surrounding each AMBER Plan activation. Moreover ARMS announced that if a police department continually disregarded the criteria, they would instruct broadcasters not to honor that agency's activation requests.

One of the more difficult responsibilities of law-enforcement will be to tell a parent that a particular incident does not fit the criteria of the plan, so an alert cannot be activated. If the plan is triggered too often, then the public may lose faith in the system, and people will not react to future alerts. Law enforcement may find other means to alert the public about an incident that does not fit AMBER Alert criteria.

Special Thanks to the Salt Lake Sheriff's Office and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children for helping with this training summary and questionnaire. Please contact Paul Murphy at the Office of the Utah Attorney General, (801) 538-1892, with any questions or suggestions.